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SUBJECT: IRF VISIT SPARKS DISCUSSION ON HOW FAR SAUDI
ARABIA SHOULD GO IN PROMOTING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Classified By: Consul General Martin R. Quinn for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)
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11. (C) SUMMARY: May 2-4 visit of International Religious Freedom officer, and meetings with Saudis, expats and OIC officials, sparked discussion on Saudi Arabia's basic posture on IRF issues. Meetings revealed that many Saudis continue to question the rationale for respecting non-Muslim rights in an all-Muslim country governed by the Quran. While the prevailing, semi-official Saudi attitude is that there are no problems with individual non-Muslims praying at home, at the same time there is little support for foreign laborers having rights to freely congregate for prayer. Shi'a living in Jeddah continue to express fears and express feelings that they are treated as second class citizens. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) EDUCATORS SAY SITUATION HAS GOTTEN WORSE SINCE THE 80's: At a roundtable of local school principals and educators, two women commented that religious and other expressions of personal freedom in the Kingdom have been on the decline since the 1980s, citing the Juhaiman Utaibi seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 as the specific turning point. Prior to this time, it is maintained, Jeddah schools were allowed to hold prom nights with music and dance and male supervisors were permitted to work in girls' schools. Thirty years ago women were not forced to wear the neck-to-ankle black abayas. Interlocutors claim that the Egyptian and Syrian Muslim brotherhood was a key force in brainwashing a whole generation of Saudis with extremist ideology during the 1970's. One contact noted that that Mecca and Medina have been "hijacked by people from 1000 miles away," referring to religious authorities in Riyadh and the Kingdom's central Najd region.

13. (C) TEACHERS SPEW HATE, NOT THE CURRICULUM: Dr. Maisoun El Dakhell of King Abdul-Aziz University noted that it is not the curriculum in Saudi schools that promotes intolerance, but often the teacher's personal interpretation. She recalled several incidents in which Saudi (and other Arab) secondary school and university teachers taught students to "hate" other religions, including Shi'a. She recounted one instance in which a teacher told her student that "a Sunni woman is not allowed to marry a Shiite man because in the Shiite holy books it states that an observant Shi'a cannot be accepted into the Holy Mosque unless he/she kills a Sunni."

14. (C) JEDDAH SHI'A HIGHLIGHT DIFFICULTIES: Two members of the local Shi'a community in Jeddah complained that their lives are difficult and they live in constant fear of Ministry of Interior security forces -- similar to claims the community has made in the past (reftel). In particular, they noted a fear of the security services and pointed to incidents where they have been personally interrogated or

threatened due to their worship practices. Though both men are successful professionals, they noted that the road to success for Shi'a is often difficult as employers are not likely to promote an employee if he is known to be Shi'a. Many Shi'a are found living in the slums of Jeddah. They claim that SAG does not accurately report the number of Shi'a living in the Kingdom. They believe that approximately 15 to 20 percent of the population is Shi'a while official SAG figures represent the minority as only 10% of the population.

15. (C) ETHIOPIANS AND SAUDIS WEIGH PLIGHT OF FOREIGN CHRISTIANS: Muktar Mohammed, a labor and welfare officer at the Ethiopian consulate, explained that in general Christian Ethiopians do not encounter significant problems in the Kingdom. However, most who choose to worship do so in the confines of their homes. Protestants tend to be more active and are more likely to arrange small worship services than are the Ethiopian Orthodox. Some Christians in the Kingdom seeking work represent themselves as Muslims coming for pilgrimage; some of these eventually convert to Islam. Since Christians do not hold large worship services, they are rarely confronted by Saudi authorities. However, the Ethiopian Consulate has received messages from unidentified callers asking whether the consulate is trying to convert Muslims to Christianity; Ethiopian consular officer speculates that such calls emanate from "the security services." There have been random, unsubstantiated reports that Saudis are being proselytized in Mecca by Ethiopian Christians. At a separate meeting, one Saudi suggested that non-Muslims have a choice about whether to come to the Kingdom and should carefully weigh the sacrifice of their religious freedom before deciding to come. At a ConGen Jeddah gathering attended mostly by intellectuals and Jeddawi elite, the tone was markedly different with one contact stating he would be pleased to attend church services if they

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were permitted in Saudi Arabia.

16. (C) CEMETERY FOR NON-MUSLIMS: IRF officer paid a visit to Jeddah's cemetery for non-Muslims. An approximately half acre plot, the nineteenth century cemetery lies behind an unmarked wall in a busy downtown area of Jeddah. The burial, is poorly maintained with six rows of tombstones. Most stones are inscribed with the names of the deceased while some simply bear the individual's name. (A disproportionately large number seem to be infants from the Philippines and India giving rise to speculation that they were the unwanted children of domestic servants.) The Chadian custodian/grave digger reported that vandals occasionally enter the cemetery to desecrate headstones. He also claimed that the Mutawwa (religious police) once visited the cemetery to complain about the crosses carved on some of the tombstones, but never returned. Surprisingly, two larger headstones from the early 20th century carried still-legible Hebrew and German inscriptions.

17. (C) OIC CLAIMS SUPPORT FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM; FIQH ACADEMY REVIEWS PENALTY FOR APOSTASY: At a meeting with IRF officer and OIC officials, Ambassador Hemayat Uddin, Director General for Cultural and Social Affairs, commented that religious freedom is important, connecting the principle to OIC's campaign to combat Islamophobia. "Freedom of religion is sacrosanct, but there has to be a limit so that freedom of speech does not encroach on others." Ufuk Gokcen, advisor to Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, mentioned that the status of minorities is an OIC priority: "We advocate strongly for freedom of minorities from any prosecution or pressure." Explaining that OIC advocacy includes the freedom to worship and practice religion, Gokcen pointed out that the Secretary General had made a strong statement against attacks on Christians in Iraq and pressing for the release of South Korean hostages in Afghanistan. Gokcen was non-committal as to whether the new Human Rights Commission of the OIC will handle the religious freedom issue, noting that "the issue of religious freedom is very sensitive." Hemayat Uddin believes that the recent Durban II preparatory meeting demonstrates that the OIC is pressing to remove inflammatory language,

mentioning that a reference to "Israel" was removed from the text of the Durban declaration, commenting, "You have no idea how much went into this." Discussion touched on an ongoing conference on apostasy recently held at Sharjah University under the auspices of the International Islamic Fiqh Academy, an OIC-affiliated institution. Hope was expressed that the discussion will eventually lead to the removal of the death penalty as standard punishment for apostasy.

18. (C) INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC FORUM FOR DIALOGUE: Dr. Hamid Bin Ahmad Al-Rifaie, President of the International Islamic Forum for Dialogue, questioned the role that the U.S. plays in the realm of religious freedom, (rhetorically) asking: "Who gives the United States the authority to monitor and impose religious freedom on the countries of the world?" He suggested that this mission should be carried out by the United Nations. Al-Rifaie launched into a series of diatribes against US policy, giving scant indication of interest in conducting an open dialogue on religious freedom.

19. (C) LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AS A CONCEPT: At the National Society for Human Rights, Dr. Husein Al-Sharif, Manager of the organization's Mecca Branch, opined that religious freedom is a sensitive and complicated topic, stating his conviction that it is important to work first on developing the capacities of people at the conceptual level since many Saudis are unable to understand or appreciate the concept of religious freedom. He ventured that if the average Saudi were asked the meaning of religious freedom, the likely response would be to equate religious freedom with freedom to perform prohibited acts of immorality. Al-Sharif discussed the need to make the mission of his office more relevant to the Saudi population itself. He mentioned that the organization's good work has drawn attention and that an appreciation of the organization's mission is slowly developing.

110. (C) COMMENT: IRF meetings revealed that Saudis struggle to agree on what Religious Freedom means and how far rights should be extended. Many Saudis find the US position on religious freedom hostile to the very essence and nature of Saudi Arabia, founded and maintained under the rule of the country's strict, fundamentalist interpretation of the Quran. Despite the fact that roughly 25% of the Kingdom's residents are foreign, with a sizeable minority of non-Muslims, the onus remains mostly on individuals to decide before arrival whether they can tolerate living in a religiously restrictive environment. While non-Muslim prayer books are, in fact, rarely confiscated at the airport, organized Christian prayer sessions continue to irritate authorities, provoking hostile reactions. Attitudes with regard to religious freedom are ingrained in the Saudi mind while improvements are likely to

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occur only after significant educational and cultural reform and evolution. END COMMENT.
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